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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAHORE 000210

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SUBJECT: NAWAZ SHARIF ON ZARDARI: SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY, NOT THE PRESIDENT

REF: ISLAMABAD 2683

CLASSIFIED BY: Carmela A. Conroy, Consul General, US Consulate General Lahore, US Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Former Prime Minister/Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) leader Mian Nawaz Sharif said he resisted attacking President Zardari, despite pressure from his own party to do so. Zardari had called to thank Sharif for his responsible reproach, and Sharif responded that he was not trying to protect Zardari, he was trying to preserve democracy for Pakistan. Sharif's younger brother and Chief Minister of the Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif, said he believed Zardari was making nice in order to delay taking action to devolve authority from the president to the prime minister.

Nawaz Takes a Call

¶2. (C) Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), was in a jovial mood on November 10, confiding to Consul General (CG) Lahore that while he was in the northern areas the weekend of November 7-8, President Zardari had called him. Zardari thanked him for his statements supporting Zardari's serving a full term of office-or at least not being removed unconstitutionally. Sharif said he told Zardari he had taken his stance to defend democracy, not to defend Zardari, and agreed to meet Zardari one-on-one on a date still to be determined. He also told Zardari that he had to stop listening to corrupt advisors, such as Interior Minister Rehman Malik, and heed the words of Sharif and others who loved democracy. Sharif insisted he was not trying to "get" Zardari, he was just trying to get him to stop following bad advice, further weakening democracy, and inviting military takeover.

¶3. (C) Sharif said the "best case scenario" would be for Zardari

to follow through with his promise to repeal article 17 of the constitution, shifting power from the president to the prime minister. Once that happened, Zardari could serve his entire term as president. It would help secure a democratic future for Pakistan and besides, nobody would want the job once it lost real power. Note: Repealing article 17 would, among other things, eliminate a two-term cap on being prime minister and shift the power to appoint the chiefs of the armed forces from the president to the prime minister. Sharif has been prime minister twice already.

¶4. (C) Sharif said the time was not right for mid-term parliamentary elections, given the security situation and Zardari retaining the ill-gotten powers of former president Pervaiz Musharref. Once article 17 was repealed, elections for the national assembly could occur without threatening democratic institutions. Sharif stressed that he supported democracy over personal or party interests, and that Zardari should be removed from office only by constitutional means. Pressed for specifics, he said that meant impeachment by the parliament.

Shahbaz Smells a Rat

¶5. (C) Sharif's younger brother and Punjab Chief Minister Shabhaz Sharif said he was surprised to hear that Zardari had called the former prime minister. He said he believed that

LAHORE 00000210 002 OF 002

Zardari called Nawaz Sharif just to delay repealing article 17. He was certain that Zardari would not pursue the path optimistically outlined by the former prime minister, but would instead continue to listen to corrupt advisors, dragging Pakistan down with him and risking an eventual military coup. Note: President Zardari told the Ambassador he believed he could play for time and retain office despite the fiasco of the National Reconciliation Ordinance, reftel.

¶6. (C) Both Sharifs noted that PML-N members were criticizing Nawaz Sharif for pulling his punches against Zardari, including National Assembly Member Ayaz Amir, who had recently written a newspaper column to that effect. Nawaz Sharif reiterated that he was willing to take hits in the service of democracy, and said that he appreciated the Obama Administration's ongoing outreach to all political parties in Pakistan. He expressed appreciation and admiration for the Secretary's three-day visit to Pakistan, noting that even media organizations who disagreed with American policies favorably commented on her willingness to listen to different Pakistani points of view.

¶7. (C) Conclusion/Comment: Nawaz Sharif makes no bones about his eagerness to become prime minister again, once powers now held by the president are restored to the prime minister. Nevertheless, he is eager to be in the good graces of the USG, stressing that he hates the sin, not the sinner, and his criticisms of Zardari are intended to guide Zardari to better governance and stronger democracy. Given his concern over the impact of a military coup, he may well be sincere.

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